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Between Nationalism, Internationalism and Colonial Quadrillage: The Action Chrétienne en Orient in Mandatory Syria (1922–1946)

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Between Nationalism, Internationalism and Colonial Quadrillage: The Action Chrétienne en Orient in Mandatory Syria (1922–1946)

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Q2 Abstract


Q4 Despite growing internationalization, national ties have remained a structural aspect of missionary and humanitarian work. This was especially true of the Interwar period in the Middle East, where colonial powers, independent states and political ideologies competed. The beginnings of the Action Chrétienne en Orient (ACO) bear witness to this: the ACO, specialized in assistance to Christian Anatolian refugees and missionary work towards Muslims, made strategic use of its national connections. It retained German and Protestant connections, while serving as a formally French broker between refugees or Protestant missionary organizations and the French colonial authority. Yet as looming independence seemed to threaten the position of Christian refugees, the ACO gradually entered the ‘colonial quadrillage’ through which France exerted guidance over voluntary organizations.

Keywords

French Mandate, colonialism in the middle east, humanitarianism, refugees-Assyrians and Armenians, missionary history and colonialism in the middle east, Lebanon, Syria, Aleppo,

AQ1 Upper Jazeera

AQ2 Introduction

In January 1939, Gabriel Puaux, the French High Commissioner (head of the French colonial administration) in Syria and Lebanon and a Protestant himself, met with the French pastor supported by the Action Chrétienne en Orient (ACO) in Damascus, Daniel Couderc. Paul Berron (1887–1970), the director of the  Organization, commented upon the meeting that Puaux, who confused the ACO with the organizations supported by French Senator Frédéric Eccard, had a ‘fuzzy’ view of ‘French Protestant work’ in the mandate.¹

The anecdote could give the impression that the ACO, a missionary humanitarian organization established to provide relief to Armenian refugees and to evangelize Muslims in mandatory Syria,

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was still under the radar for the French authorities, which had probably been the case a few years earlier. Yet the archives of the organization show it to be a well-connected transnational operation. How can we account for the apparent difficulty displayed by colonial authorities to locate the ACO in the landscape of the many voluntary organizations active in the mandate? The ACO's position did not fit easily in the grid through which colonial authorities and the people of the country commonly understood voluntary action, through a set of religious-national associations, linking for instance French interests and Catholic or secular organizations, and Protestant missions with American or British diplomatic protection. What light, then, does the case of the ACO shed on the institutional relations surrounding humanitarian missionary organizations in colonial settings? What agency did the ACO enjoy, vis-à-vis the colonial state or indigenous institutions?

Interwar Syria was a state in the making. The construction of state organizations in the mandate coincided with a need for emergency aid, in a post-famine and post-genocide context.² The inchoative nature of the state in Syria, the tight budget channelled by the colonial authorities, and the ready presence of numerous voluntary organizations of a missionary humanitarian nature, explain why the latter, including the ACO, were given significant room to operate by the mandatory power.

Mandatory rule in Syria was colonial rule on the cheap: the French colonial state chose not to 'guide' voluntary organizations, as had been its reputation in Ottoman days. Then, missionary and philanthropic actors operated with all the 'machinery' of French government support (Blyth, 1927: 102–107). Instead, the French mandatory authorities sought to establish a 'colonial quadrillage' (Spindler, 2010), which embraced voluntary organizations of many Western countries in order to cover as much ground as possible, and directed them with a soft touch, depending on the needs that the colonial state perceived (Bocquet, 2002).

Keeping German ties, the ACO did not fall directly into the quadrillage. It defined itself strategically as Alsatian, hence French, so as to be able to maintain its work. Over the years, its ties with other French Protestant organizations intensified and it was able to work as a broker between Protestant missionary organizations or Protestant congregations and the High Commission. As we shall see, the ACO was an emanation of German missionary humanitarianism, but it operated in an increasingly international missionary setting and gradually fitted in the French colonial quadrillage in Syria.

An Organization Maintaining Foundational Ties with Germany

It was no secret that the Action Chrétienne en Orient had been established to take the place of German humanitarian missionary organizations in the parts of the Ottoman Empire which had passed under French colonial tutelage after the First World War (Berron, 1962: 17–18). After the occupation of Syria and Lebanon by the French forces, German institutions had been expelled (Eyrard and Krebs, 2007: 74–76). The goal of the ACO's foundation was to continue the work of the *Deutscher Hilfsbund für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient* (aka 'Hilfsbund' or 'Frankfurt Committee'), a German missionary humanitarian organization established to provide relief to Armenian survivors of the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 (Kévonian, 2004: 377). The way for the Hilfsbund to find a footing in Syria was through the agency of its Alsatian members, who had become French citizens upon the signature of the Rhetondes armistice. Before the establishment of the ACO, Berron had worked as an inspector for the Hilfsbund, conducting a mission of enquiry in Syria in 1922. He concluded that the dire situation of the refugees, especially around Aleppo, required Christians in Europe to continue providing support (Berron, 1962: 16). The

ACO was devised as a functionally French institution to be able to work on the field, but it maintained close correspondence with the Hilfsbund.

A Legacy of Nationalized Missionary and Humanitarian Work

National ties have never been meaningless in modern humanitarianism, and this was more true in the Interwar period than it is today. The nationalization of humanitarianism had its advantages and its drawbacks in a colonial context. National ties with the colonial power in Syria could imply financial help, as the ACO received for its educational work once its relations had warmed up with the High Commission,³ or direct implication in the functions of government. At the very least it cleared many administrative roadblocks: for the ACO, it meant the possibility to start working right away with humanitarian relief, medical work and job provision through a weaving workshop, 'Elim':⁴ A major aspect of the ACO's work was resettlement, as the organization invested in lands and construction in the new neighbourhood of Aleppo devised for refugees, Davudiye (*Le Levant*, 1939). In the second half of the 1930s missionary stations were founded in Upper Jazeera between the Khabur and Tigris valleys (Berron, 1934a), in Zahle to work with Assyrian refugees, and, in cooperation with the French Société d'Évangélisation des Colonies, support for the French Protestant parish in Damascus (*Le Levant*, 1937). This growth would have been blocked had the ACO been institutionally identified as German rather than French, not least because the mandatory Service de l'Instruction Publique kept a close supervision of school programmes (Sbaiti, 2009, 2015). At the time of the ACO's foundation, British, American and Scandinavian missionary humanitarian organizations operated in the mandate, but German ones were explicitly excluded from the colonial quadrillage.

National ties were a source of uncertainty for the future at any rate, as the colonial order was already being vehemently contested. Keeping national ties in the West would be criticized from a nationalist anticolonialist perspective as association with the colonizer, especially if, as was the case of the Action Chrétienne en Orient, the national ties were formally with the colonial power.

For the ACO, anticipating Syrian independence meant first and foremost reaching out to politicians. One of its targets was the indigenous government in Damascus which had been established according to the mandate to deal with day-to-day matters of government, worked under the supervision of the High Commission, but tried to assert a degree of autonomy, and by 1936 came to be headed by nationalists. It also meant establishing good relations with politicians from certain ethnic or religious groups, such as the Kurds among whom the ACO was establishing institutions in Upper Jazeera at the time. But these various actors considered the organization no longer as tied with Germany, but with the French colonial power. Abd al-Rahman Kayali (1887–1969), a nationalist from Aleppo who became education minister in the Syrian government in 1936, kept postponing meeting with pastor Couderc to show his distance from the colonial power⁵ and blowing hot and cold on the ACO's school to pressure it into teaching in Arabic rather than French or Kurdish.⁶ Among communal politicians, pastor Couderc kept relations with major Druze⁷ and especially Kurdish families, upon which the work in Upper Jazeera was contingent.⁸

The ACO's position was precarious as nationalists of all hues and nationalities were seeking allies among European states, and being seen as French was not a winning card under those circumstances. Its main goal was to avoid conflicts and help bring about a political solution, so as not to jeopardize Christian refugees at the end of the mandate and risk a repetition of the mass murders of the First World War. The ACO had supported cultural and linguistic efforts to revive an Armenian identity in the camps, partly from an evangelical perspective: Berron wondered in *Le Levant* whether the dispersion of Armenians was an opportunity for them to evangelize their host countries,

contrasting diaspora Armenians with the ones who, remaining in Turkey, were at risk of being assimilated (Berron, 1925a). But the political shift of the late 1930s put the ACO in the uncomfortable position of having to advocate the partial ‘assimilation’ of Armenian refugees as a prudential strategy:

The main task which Armenians in Syria must face is to *assimilate*, so that, far from forming a foreign and undesirable body, they should represent a secure national element that can be relied upon, yet without losing entirely the national originality for which they have fought and suffered through the centuries (Berron, 1938).

The question for the ACO had moved from whether to be German or French, to whether humanitarianism and mission should nurture a national specificity or promote accommodation with the majority Arab / Syrian society.

More than the refugees, independence in 1946 would indeed jeopardize many French religious organizations, from the most visible and powerful ones such as the Society of Jesus (Verdeil, 2011), to less visible ones such as the ACO.⁹ By then, the organization was shifting to an ostensibly international structure, but this did not preserve it from administrative roadblocks from the new Syrian institutions, forcing it to either become nationalized or move out.

A Lingering Suspicion

Keeping its German connections under the radar did not prevent the ACO from being suspected of serving a pro-German agenda or of working directly for German intelligence.

Among those suspecting it were the Jesuits, who had been in a hostile competition with Protestant missions throughout the nineteenth century (Verdeil, 2011a: 44–47), and who, despite a thaw in their relations with established Protestant institutions under the auspices of the mandate, remained wary of the intensified Protestant activism under post-war conditions. General suspicion included the ACO, which was understood to be a subcontractor for German organizations, but this suspicion seemed to be addressed to the still largely Germanophobe public of France rather than for internal consumption. A 1926 report by Jesuit Father Jean Mécérian on Armenian refugees in Syria highlights this distrust. Two versions of the report exist, one for public circulation in *Les Missions catholiques*, the monthly published by the French fundraising organization Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi,¹⁰ the other ‘more complete’ one, confidential and destined to Pope Pius XI. Detailing the work of Protestant organizations, Mécérian presents the following report:

The ‘*Action Chrétienne en Orient*’ develops its works in Aleppo more and more, and it has major projects: buying vast lands for the establishment of Armenian villages. It is the former German Protestant Mission, dating back from pre-war days and the war era, now presenting itself as French Protestant Mission.¹¹

The confidential and more belligerent version destined to the pope kept silent on the German ties of the ACO, which worked as a red cloth for Catholic benefactors, and focused on the organization’s projects and its international ties:

[The ACO’s] Director General came to inspect the works and launched a major project, through their organ called *Le Levant*, i.e. to buy vast lands upon which to establish Armenian villages, in the vicinity of Antioch or Latakia, near the Mediterranean coast of Syria. This Mission has ties with the Protestant organizations of

Northern Europe and has great chances to accomplish its project. Alas, it will mean the establishment of Protestant colonies, if no Catholic organization is brought there to diminish their effects.¹²

The insider perspective shows the Jesuits of Syria to be more afraid of the international ties of the ACO, with their widened possibilities for fundraising, than of its lingering German ties.

The same suspicion regarding the ACO's national ties were harboured among the colonial authorities. French officials appeared puzzled by the ACO's structure and staff. Berron summed it up in 1925 to the director of the Hilfsbund, Schuchardt:

The situation is also hard to understand for the officials indeed. We call ourselves an Alsatian-French work. Its head, namely myself, they still picture as the German who, during the war, has played a definite, although peaceful, role. Over there [in Syria], the staff are all non-French, which can naturally be presented as intentional—of course, the thought that what this is all about is a German [operation?] in disguise is never far away.¹³

Because of this suspicion, the ACO was careful to avoid ostensible German ties. Indeed, as we shall see, the ACO maintained a working relation with the French authorities and the French Protestant organizations that were established after 1926, when former German properties were turned to French Protestant institutions for good.¹⁴

Suspicion would resurface under tense geopolitical conditions. During the Second World War, after the Free French Forces and British Imperial forces occupied Syria and Lebanon in July 1941, both the Gaullist and British administrations that coexisted in the country kept the ACO staff in the country under surveillance on suspicion of communications with Germany.¹⁵ The ties of the French Protestant parish in Damascus with the ACO were cut and, as pastor Couderc had left the city,¹⁶ the Protestant chaplain of the Free French Forces took charge of it.¹⁷ By then, the committees of the ACO in the Netherlands and Strasbourg had been cut off from Syria.¹⁸

The suspicion was renewed by the French defeat of 1940. As Alsace-Moselle became again part of the Reich as part of the French-German armistice of June 1940, the ACO in Strasbourg was rebaptised 'Strasbourg Mission in the Orient' (*Strassburger Morgenlandmission*)¹⁹ and discussions started as to its unification with the Hilfsbund. Berron was also afraid that any channelling of funds from Strasbourg to Syria would entail the closing down of the missions on the ground—even during the year when Syria and Lebanon were under the control of the post-armistice Vichy regime in France. Unification with the Hilfsbund failed when the 'Strasbourg Mission in the Orient' was placed by the German local authorities under the exclusive authorities of the Alsatian Lutheran church, much against Berron's own long-expressed reservations vis-à-vis 'denominational Lutheranist [*konfessionnell Lutheraner*]' missionaries:²⁰ the Hilfsbund was multi-denominational.²¹

After the war, responsibilities within the ACO were redistributed, with Berron still at its head but with greater representation of the Swiss committee:²² the ACO's identification as 'French', a strategic advantage under the mandate, was becoming a liability in new independent states. The result was an officialization of the organization's international character at the top.

The Age of Internationalized Humanitarianism

The Interwar period saw an accelerated internationalization of philanthropy and humanitarian aid. Interwar humanitarianism rested on a diversity of pillars, inspired by different versions of internationalism—liberal, socialist, Catholic, Protestant in particular (Calvin and Sluga, 2016). Despite

this, humanitarian organizations were commonly identified in national terms. This was especially true in the territories that had been carved out of the Ottoman Empire, where Western diplomacy already granted diplomatic protection to missionary organizations in the pre-war period.

The ACO did not get started on its own in Syria: it benefitted not only from its German connections, which had turned into liabilities anyway, but also from the intensified humanitarian work done by Protestants from various nationalities, mostly missionaries. With the latter cooperation worked both ways. The mainly American, British, Swiss and Scandinavian Protestant organizations active in Syria in the 1920s were solicited by the ACO for information,²³ staff,²⁴ and institutions to learn languages and theology,²⁵ train staff and retire for holidays.²⁶ Conversely, the ACO could offer money through its regular promotion of the 'Golden Rule' day of fasting in solidarity with Armenian refugees,²⁷ articles and reports,²⁸ manpower,²⁹ and healthcare.³⁰ Berron also used these international connections to gather support for his projects of colonization by refugees in coastal Syria.³¹ These connections were not always synergetic, however: different organizations gave priority to missionary work here, as in the case of the ACO, to humanitarian work there.³² These tensions notwithstanding, everyday missionary work was difficult to break down along clean national lines.

In this network of exchanges, the national identification of the ACO provided it with an edge. It could facilitate the relations with the colonial authority on behalf of missions originating in other countries, although within definite limits. Berron would for instance turn down the request of Marshall Fox, missionary for the Society of Friends, in the following terms:

As to your question if it were not possible to try steps near the French government in order to obtain privileges for relief-works to import wheat and so on, I think it would be pretty difficult to do something. It seems that in countries like England, the Netherlands or Switzerland, favours are more easily obtained for philanthropical [sic] enterprises, than in France.³³

The national view of voluntary organizations held by the mandatory encouraged the ACO to strengthen its international structure.

An International Structure

The web of the ACO's international protestant ties was visible through its workers. During the Interwar period, the majority was made up of Armenian and Assyrian refugees. Later on, their colleagues would come from the Netherlands, in the case of Arie and Frida Breet,³⁴ or Britain for Hilda Saunders, supported by a British missionary committee (Le Levant, 1939). The ACO's schools, despite teaching in French, were not perceived as French institutions due to the accent of the various European missionaries and to the funds which, especially during the Second World War, came in majority from Switzerland, with increasing difficulty, and from the United States.³⁵

Indeed, the funding was structurally international. It is difficult to trace it from the beginning: *Le Levant* initially kept a lid on the geographical origin of the funds in most cases. Every month, it listed the individual amounts given, sometimes adding a motive ('income from strawberry picking' (104 francs), 3 francs 'from my children's piggy bank', etc. (Le Levant, 1923); no German donation appeared as such.

Such funding was becoming parochial as fundraising changed scale with the expansion of US philanthropy. As the ACO developed its work in the 1920s, an underlying question was whether it should reach out for the Near East Relief, which was channelling massive funds from US philanthropies to other Protestant institutions in the Levant. This solution came with strings attached: US

philanthropy privileged relief and planned reconstruction policy over missionary work. Berron constantly refused to compromise the missionary character of the ACO for funding and criticized Dr Lepsius's mission, a major German Protestant mission prior to 1918, who by 1924 was attempting to be on board NER programmes and receive NER money.³⁶

By the end of the 1930s, the bulk of the budget was covered by the Netherlands.³⁷ During the Second World War, when ties between France or the Netherlands and Syria were cut, the Swiss Committee of the ACO took over the support of the missionaries who had remained on the ground. Yet the bulk of the budget in those years came from a support committee in the United States, the Orphaned Missions Fund.³⁸ During the war, the funds (in Syrian pounds) channelled to the ACO in Syria evolved as shown below (Figure 1).

The International Guise of Colonial Policy

International work was supposed to be secured through the structure of the mandate: in theory, national ties were not supposed to be an advantage in the mandate of Syria and Lebanon, due to the international structure surrounding colonial rule in the mandates. Starting in July 1923, the territory was administered by France according to colonial principles, but within the limits of a number of international obligations, among them 'religious liberty' (Davis, 1938). As the mandatory powers in the Middle East, Britain and France, were commonly identified as the protectors of the Protestant and Catholic churches respectively, they would have to refrain in particular from promoting one Christian denomination against another. Moreover, they would have to allow for the work of foreign missions. Yet these did not have a limitless margin of manoeuvre, due to the growing role of majority religions in mandatory politics (Robson, 2011), to the targeting of missionary organizations by anticolonial nationalists (Sharkey, 2011), and to the growing outrage caused by missionary proselytism (Baron, 2014). 'Religious liberty' was given different meanings, and used accordingly by actors following different agendas: while Syrian Muslim nationalist in particular argued that religious freedom implied the freedom from the pressure and proselytism from Christian missionaries, Protestant missionaries understood it to mean the freedom to change

	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
France	24187	-	-	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	8942	13304	-	-	-	-	-
Switzerland	1561	6920	24058	9503	10560	3595	5176
United States	-	436	3270	21065	31570	29000	31750

Figure 1. Evolution of ACO funding during the second world War. Note: Bref aperçu de l'action de M. et K. Meyer au sein de l'ACO, Alep et ailleurs, 1940-1945 [1946]. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.

individually of religion, and therefore the possibility to welcome converts in their congregations. Berron was adamant in making the latter point as conversions prompted growing national outrage by 1938.³⁹ But he was careful to avoid the accusation of proselytism, which could bring dangerous backlash in the name of religious liberty; not least because he had met in 1935 Alzire Richoz,⁴⁰ a Swiss Protestant missionary expelled from Egypt after a public case of forced conversion and prevented from returning to the mission field thereafter Baron (2014: 1–4). At the end of the day, the interpretation of religious liberty depended on the colonial power and on the balance of powers surrounding it.

In practice, religious liberty was limited by politics, even between religious institutions of different nations. Missionary institutions of different religions and nationalities did not have the same standing in the eyes of the mandatory powers. A major exception arose from the Versailles Treaty. Article 438 of the treaty allowed the mandatory power to entrust the possessions of religious institutions under the protection of the Triplice powers to organizations of their own nationality, provided these were of the same religious group and maintained the same functions in the institutions as before the occupation Eyrard and Krebs (2007: 72–73). In 1924–1926, the High Commission and the French Foreign ministry pushed French Protestant institutions to take over the buildings of former German Protestant Missions in Beirut, which had been occupied by the French army and the Beirut municipality until then. The government's haste was due to its fears about the consequences of the looming entry of Germany into the League of Nations. To pre-empt a petition for restitution of the buildings, it needed to repurpose them.⁴¹ Berron's correspondence shows that his sympathies clearly lay at the time with the German Protestant institutions opposing their spoliation: in 1924, he provided advice to German representatives, apparently with insider information as to the legal vulnerabilities in the position of the French government, in order to secure the retrieval of the buildings of the Deaconesses of Kaiserwerth in Beirut the way Catholics were able to retrieve theirs.⁴² Yet Berron soon abandoned the case, after his intervention in favour of the Deaconesses of Kaiserwerth had come to the knowledge of the French Société d'Évangélisation des Colonies Eyrard and Krebs (2007: 106–107). Indeed, soon after the establishment of a French Protestant parish in the buildings and the creation of an association, the French Protestant Works in Syria and Lebanon (FPWSL), intended to undertake religious, social and educative work, the ACO and the representatives of the central Protestant institutions in France would connect and come to work together.

Moreover, colonial centralization created differences in religious policy on largely national grounds. Established French-supported institutions of various religious and philosophical affiliations, such as the Society of Jesus for Catholicism and the Mission Laïque Française supported by French secularists,⁴³ had more direct access and influence on policy to the High Commission than any other foreign religious organization or indigenous religious bodies as well. By that token, French Protestant institutions derived advantages from their nationality, but they were seen as a marginal constituency nonetheless.

Yet more than anything, the position of the High Commission was guided by its tight budget, which led it to endorse the work of the ACO and to direct it towards neglected areas.

An Increasingly French Actor in Colonial Syria

For most of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, it seems the ACO was only loosely connected with the French mandatory authorities. Whatever connections existed, transited through the French Protestant parish of Beirut and the FPWSL. These latter institutions reflected a very different milieu from the ACO, that of the Fédération Protestante de France, the federal body gathering Calvinist

and Lutheran churches across France, the intellectuals of the Protestant Faculty of Theology of Paris, and the missionary organizations that had led the protestant missionary work in the French colonial empire and beyond, the Société des Missions Evangéliques de Paris (SMEP) and the Société d'Evangelisation des Colonies.⁴⁴ That milieu was much more official and closely associated with the French state: in the spring of 1926, it had sent three of its representatives, including the former head of the SMEP, pastor Jean Bianquis, and the pro-French senator of the Bas-Rhin *département* in Alsace, Frédéric Eccard, to negotiate the transfer of the former German Protestant buildings in Beirut to French Protestant organizations Eyrard and Krebs (2007: 126–133).

Despite his earlier intervention in favour of the Deaconesses of Kaiserwerth, Berron welcomed the mission, in which he saw an opportunity from the point of view of his humanitarian work. After the initial emergency of providing relief to Armenian refugees, the priorities of refugees were shifting towards re-emigration. Armenian Protestant Pastors Hadidian and Nokhoudian had approached Berron for help in getting visas for refugees to France. Seizing upon the presence of the French Protestant delegation, Berron encouraged the two pastors to approach Eccard and Bianquis and ask them to pressure the French government to allow more Armenian refugees into France. He also entreated them to have Eccard press the High Commission to stop enlisting Armenians in the troops repressing the Syrian Revolt that had been going on since the summer of 1925: these recruitments were weakening the political situation of Armenian refugees.⁴⁵ Having followed Berron's advice, Hadidian also reported that they pressed the senator to facilitate 'evangelical missionary work in Beirut and in Syria, to open French Protestant schools [...]. This is a great need in this country'.⁴⁶ Not only was the ACO in contact with the French Protestant parish of Beirut, but he had clout with it. Yet it would take another ten years for the relations to become organized. To what can we attribute this time lapse?

There was a cultural distance between the ACO on the one hand, and the French Protestant parish in Beirut and the FPWSL on the other, although the gap appeared to be located mainly in the official French institutions in Paris which supervised the parish and the FPWSL. The latter milieu was more intellectual, more closely linked with the French government and with colonial policy. No doubt ACO missionaries felt the 'Parisian' committees were looking down on them as provincial, less educated Protestants with a different (Pietistic) spiritual orientation. Couderc said as much when he noted, after a spat with the Société d'Evangelisation des Colonies: 'I understand and share the well-deserved horror that Mister Brès [pastor of the French Protestant parish of Beirut] and Mister [Philippe] Bianquis have for these Committees in Paris'.⁴⁷ The latter 'committees' (especially the committee of the Fédération Protestante de France in charge of supervising the work in Syria and Lebanon and the Société d'Evangelisation des Colonies) maintained a heavy centralization and discouraged cooperation and the mutualization of staff which were the ACO's common practice.⁴⁸

But the major difference lay in the function each of them assigned to Protestant work. The FPWSL was wary of doing missionary work; in the case of its main educational institution, the Collège Protestant Français of Beirut, the head of the school was determined to stay away from any form of proselytism: the goal was to maintain the attractivity of the Collège for the daughters of well-to-do families from religious communities that tended to shun Catholic French schools Eyrard and Krebs (2007: 148–158). (~~Eyrard and Krebs, 2007: 148–158~~). This intent fitted perfectly in the French colonial quadrillage, which tried to reach through voluntary organizations every area and every community without setting up a costly universal set of state institutions. On the contrary, Berron was keen to maintain the missionary nature of the work, rather than develop humanitarian aid and neglect mission work, as a number of Protestant missions in the Middle East had done in the

post-World War I period (Bourmaud, 2020). Berron rejected any intent to convert non-Protestant Christians and focused on either Muslims or existing indigenous Protestant communities among Syrians, Armenians and Assyrians. French authorities and representatives of international organizations discouraged missionary work among refugees at any rate as a threat for resettlement policies. In the Khabur valley where Assyrian refugees were being resettled in the 1930s, the ACO faced opposition from Burnier, the representative of the Nansen Committee for refugees at the League of Nations, to any missionary work there.⁴⁹ More generally, as opposed to the FPWSL, the work of the ACO seemed not to fit neatly in the French colonial 'quadrillage'. This was partly due to the suspicions about its links with Germany, but mostly to the ACO's missionary work, which was disrupting established equilibriums between French Catholics and secularists, and between the established religious communities. The situation would change in the second half of the 1930s.

The ACO as Broker Between the Colonized and the Colonizer

While being on the margin of the mandatory state, the ACO had still enough connection to forward the demands of those among whom it worked. It came to serve as a broker for the obtention of visas. It made use of its connections with the French consular staff to provide advice and facilitate the landing in France, or directed petitioners to Philippe Bianquis to entreat the consul to help.⁵⁰ While facilitating migrations to France, the ACO was also working on settling the re-emigrated refugees in France, which soon became the other half of its work. Facilitating migrations also meant trying to disentangle complex legal situations of petitioners who had to deal with the novelty of the status created for refugees after the First World War and tried to emigrate to the West⁵¹

Berron appeared ambiguous about helping the re-emigration of Armenian refugees: he thought it 'better for them to remain in the East' than to 'become workmen in the big town-manufactories [sic]'.⁵² Gradually, working as a broker with the French authorities led Berron to interiorise French official discourse: namely, the fear of massive work immigration, explaining to one would-be immigrant that 'there [were] almost three millions of strangers in France, which is a big problem for the Government'.⁵³ In this way, the work of the ACO came to dovetail with French colonial policy. Moreover, the role Berron assumed in facilitating migrations led him to exert a form of social control over the migrant refugees, especially after the migration to France, for instance asking future spouses to undergo medical examinations⁵⁴ or asking the Armenian Apostolic Delegate Balakian to enquire about the morality of a bridegroom.⁵⁵

The Integration of French Protestant Work and Its Limit

The ACO's strategy also came to coincide with French religious policy in Syria, which prompted the centralization of religious communities. Over the 1930s, the High Commission had encouraged denominational groups to organize as legally recognized communal bodies, and High Commissioner Puaux noted afterwards that 'the most diligent to submit their projects [of communal constitution] had been the Protestant' (Puaux, 1952: 71). The French Protestants, while not being citizens of Syria or Lebanon, followed the tendency by establishing a structure federating their works. In November 1936, a 'liaison committee' met for the first time, gathering the various components identified as 'French Protestantism' in the mandate. Its first decisions were to organize the sending of pastor Couderc to take charge of the French Protestant parish in Damascus, and to solicit

the formation of a coordination committee in Beirut to implement the recommendations of the liaison committee.⁵⁶ The structure pushed forward centralization.

Centralization notwithstanding, the liaison committee soon came upon tensions between its various components. Berron opposed vehemently a project supported by Parisian Protestant institutions: the appointment of a Protestant military chaplain as French Protestant 'bishop of Syria', with disciplinary powers over the various French Protestant institutions. Berron objected that French military chaplains in the mandate were not missionaries, which, in his eyes, the 'bishop' would have to be. A military chaplain would jeopardize French Protestantism as independence loomed. Most seriously, the supervision of the ACO by a French 'bishop' would be unacceptable to the international committee supervising the ACO. The ACO could not forgo its decisional and financial independence to a French supervising authority.⁵⁷

Colonial Planning for Independence

Two factors explain the change in the relations between the ACO and the colonial power at the end of the 1930s. First, was the perspective of independence: the Front Populaire, elected in government in France in 1936, pledged to sign independence treaties for Syria and Lebanon with anticolonial nationalists. Yet French authorities were trying to maintain an influence after the independence, and French voluntary organizations seemed the proper means to do that. In 1936, the ACO was solicited by general Jacquot to start work in the Upper Jazeera, a now semi-autonomous district with an important Kurdish population estranged from Arab nationalists in Damascus and Aleppo, also inhabited by Armenian and Assyrian refugees for whose security a majority-Muslim Syrian independent state was assumed by the French authorities and ACO staff to be a danger.⁵⁸ The French solicitation in Upper Jazeera reflected a desire to improve the balance sheet of the mandate in a largely neglected and fast-changing area. The ACO's prior work with Armenian and Assyrian refugees matched the needs of social institutions in the region, as identified by the French authorities. The High Commission was ready to integrate the ACO to its colonial quadrillage—on the margin: Couderc indeed feared that the Jesuits were exerting pressure to push the ACO further and further east into the Upper Jazeera, leading the organization away from the main urban and political centres.⁵⁹

Integration in the colonial quadrillage in those changing times took the form of intensified and more open interventions on the part of the High Commission to have the ACO work within certain political parameters. In 1938, the treaty for Syria failed to be ratified by the French senate. But the negotiations had put Syrian nationalists in power in Damascus, and especially after the failure to ratify, the High Commission was eager to placate the latter by any means, except sensitive core political issues. *Vis-à-vis* the ACO, it meant delaying the start of its schools in Upper Jazeera: the nationalists in government in Damascus were Arab nationalists who opposed the opening of schools in Kurdish for the Kurdish-speaking majority of the area.⁶⁰

The second main factor of change was conjunctural: at the end of 1938, a new High Commissioner of France in Syria and Lebanon was appointed. Gabriel Puaux was a Protestant diplomat sympathetic to Protestant organizations.⁶¹ Before arriving in Beirut early in 1939, he had got in touch with French Protestant organizations in Syria before leaving France. Contacted by the head of the *Fédération Protestante de France*, pastor Marc Boegner, he quickly set out to facilitate their work.⁶² For the ACO, this meant overcoming the inertia of the military governor of the Jazeera region, Colonel Marchand.⁶³ Marchand soon flipped from his dilatory behaviour to an ostensible approval of the ACO's Kurdish-language schools in Upper Jazeera.⁶⁴ The High Commission was eager at the time to secure Syria for a looming war, and therefore to seduce both Arab and

Kurdish nationalists away from German influence, and allowing the ACO could meet the purpose. Alongside providing education in an area deprived of services, the ACO's Kurdish-language schools were fully part of the colonial quadrillage of Syria.

Conclusion

The case of the ACO shows that the notion of a colonial quadrillage is of limited purchase to describe the position of voluntary agencies in mandatory Syria and Lebanon, as they kept many connections that did not fit in the framework. It was quite possible, for instance, to maintain French and German connections, although the latter became much more sensitive as the Second World War came on. What singled out the ACO among missionary organizations at the time was less its national and denominational ties than its close connection with refugee Protestant churches and constant engagement with non-Protestant churches.

Still, connections with the colonial authorities mattered, and they were far from limited to religious or relief policy: as the ACO invested in the 'reconstruction' of Syria,⁶⁵ land policy, water adduction, building policy became part of its political work. Connections with the municipality or the Syrian national government were also part and parcel of the strategy of the organization; but they did not define its work, as ACO staff focused on refugees, not European society. But over time, as the French government became eager to find a settlement in Syria in the perspective of renewed war, the ACO came under greater pressure to fall in line with the colonial quadrillage.

Nowadays, ACO members tend to downplay the idea of national affiliations for the organization, and prefer presenting the organization as a transnational entity, with strong moorings in Alsace, support committees in Switzerland, the Netherlands as well as France and fields of operation in five Middle Eastern countries. In its foundational phase during the Interwar period, the main elements of this support structure were established to work in one sole territory—Syria (and marginally in Lebanon)—under one single colonial power, France. Whereas identifying a missionary humanitarian organization such as ACO with one nation state nowadays can prove a serious drawback today, it was a common assumption prior to the Second World War.

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Notes

1. Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 26 January 1939. Action Chrétienne en Orient Archives, Strasbourg (hereafter: ACO), III-5-27.
2. The literature on the genocide and the humanitarian dimension of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the colonial era has been rapidly expanding over the last two decades. See, among others: Jackson (2015); Kévorkian (2006); Okkenhaug and Sanchez Summerer (2020); Watenpaugh (2015); White (2016)

3. Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 14 December 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
4. Büll to Berron, Beirut, 27 December 1922. ACO III-5-23, ACO Archives; Kambourian (1925). For the Turkish-speaking refugees, the name of the oasis of Elim (Exodus, 15:27) played on the meaning of *elim* ('my hand') in Turkish.
5. Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 17 January 1938 ; Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 19 January 1938 [obviously wrongly dated as 19 January 1937]. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
6. Couderc to Berron, Bloudane, 29 August 1938; Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 30 November 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives. Puaux (1952) p. 61.
7. Couderc to Berron, Bloudane, 19 August 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
8. Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 22 February 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
9. Meyer K to Berron, Aarau, 7 May 1946; Berron to the ACO missionaries in Aleppo, Westhoffen, 22 March 1948. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.
10. The Œuvre pour la Propagation de la Foi (nowadays the Œuvres Pontificales Missionnaires), was established in 1822, to support Catholic missionary work. It was unrelated with the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. See Lagrée (1991).
11. Mécérian, Les réfugiés arméniens en Syrie. Fondation de la Mission Arménienne d'Alep. 'Oct. 1926. Ds. *Miss. Cathol.* 1926 (p. 536-545).' RAR 26; Jesuit Archives in France (Vanves).
12. Mécérian, Rapport sur les réfugiés arméniens d'Alep. 'Copie du rapport destiné au St. Père.' 31 octobre 1926. RAR 26, Jesuit Archives in France (Vanves).
13. Berron to Schuchardt, Strasbourg, 5 August 1925. ACO B-II-41, ACO Archives.
- ~~14. Eyrard and Krebs (2007: 168 and 176-179).~~
15. Meyer to the Swiss Board of Directors of the ACO in Lausanne, El-Ghiné-sur-Ghazir, 31 July 1945. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.
16. Minutes of the meeting of the Committee of the French Protestant Parish in Damascus, Damascus, 3 August 1941. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
17. Comité de la Paroisse protestante française de Damas to Meyer, Damascus, 20 August 1941. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
18. Meyer, Bref aperçu de l'action de M. et K. Meyer au sein de l'ACO, Alep et ailleurs, 1940-1945 [1946], ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.
19. Berron to Möller, Strasbourg, 31 October 1940. ACO B-II-41, ACO Archives.
20. Berron to Jund, Graffenstaden, 26 June, 1925. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
21. Protokoll 144, session of the Board of Administration of the Deutscher Hilfsbund für Christliches Liebeswerk im Orient, Frankfurt-am-Main, 24 January 1942. ACO B-II-41, ACO Archives.
22. Meyer to the Swiss Board of Directors of the ACO in Lausanne, El-Ghiné-sur-Ghazir, 31 July 1945; Meyer, Extract of a letter to the Swiss Board of Directors of the ACO in Lausanne, El-Ghiné-sur-Ghazir, 7 November 1945. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.
23. Goodsell to Berron, Istanbul, 18 February 1930. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
24. Berron to Bianquis, Strasbourg-Meinau, 1 July 1938. ACO II-3-5, ACO Archives.
25. Perry to Berron, 25 July 1929; Berron to Gentle-Cackett, 7 June 1930. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
26. Gaupp to Berron, Biskinta, 1 August 1931. ACO II-3-6, ACO Archives.
27. Berron to Jund, Graffenstaden, 19 December 1924. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
28. Kurck to Berron, Rynge, 17 April, 1925; Berron to Fox, Strasbourg, 17 July 1926. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
29. Gaupp to Berron, Aleppo, 16 May 1931. ACO II-3-6, ACO Archives.
30. Berron to Gracey, Graffenstaden, 28 June 1929. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
31. Berron to Harris, Graffenstaden, 8 January 1927. ACO B-II-43, ACO Archives.
32. Fox to Berron, Brummana, 1 February 1927. ACO II-3-6, ACO Archives.
33. Berron to Fox, Strasbourg, 23 December 1936. ACO II-3-5, ACO Archives.
34. Breet to Berron, Amsterdam, 27 January 1934. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
35. Meyer to the Swiss Board of Directors of the ACO in Lausanne, El-Ghiné-sur-Ghazir, 31 July 1945. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.

36. Berron to Schuchardt, Graffenstaden, 10 September 1924. ACO B-II-41, ACO Archives.
37. Meyer to the Swiss Board of Directors of the ACO in Lausanne, Aleppo, 20 March 1945. ACO III-5-26, ACO Archives.
38. Nichol to Lytle, Beirut, 13 May, 1946. ACO II-3-6, ACO Archives.
39. Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 27 July 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
40. Berron to Breet, Strasbourg, 30 November 1935. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
41. Bianquis, extract of letter to his parents, Beirut, 24 January 1925. ACO III-5-21, ACO Archives.
42. Sekretär des Vorstandes des Rheinischen Westfallischen Diakonessen-Verein to Berron, Kaiserwerth-am-Rhein, 25 November 1924. ACO III-5-21; Berron to count von Lüttichgau, Strasbourg, 22 October 1924. ACO B-II-41, ACO Archives.
43. Bianquis, extract of letter, Beirut, 6 December 1924. ACO III-5-21, ACO Archives.
44. Berron, notes: Séance à Paris. 'Comité de liaison', 18 November 1936. ACO III-5-1, ACO Archives.
45. Berron to Hadidian and Nokhoudian, Strasbourg, 18 March 1926. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
46. Hadidian to Berron, 8 May 1926. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
47. Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 25 June 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
48. Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 25 March 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
49. Breet to Berron, 6 December 1935. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
50. Chakmakdjian to Berron, Danish Bird's Nest, Saida (Lebanon), 15 March 1928. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
51. Berron to Chakmakdjian, 23 February 1928; Berron to Chakmakdjian, 19 May 1928; Chakmakdjian to Berron, Danish Bird's Nest, Saida (Lebanon), 15 March 1928; Chakmakdjian to Berron, Danish Bird's Nest, Saida (Lebanon), 17 March 1928. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
52. Berron to Haroutunian, Graffenstaden, 6 March 1926. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
53. Berron to Kerikian, Graffenstaden, 5 October 1928. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
54. Berron to Balakian, Graffenstaden, 20 November 1926. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
55. Balakian to Berron, Paris, 14 October 1925; Balakian to Berron, Paris, 29 November 1926. ACO II-3-4, ACO Archives.
56. Berron, Notes: Séance à Paris. 'Comité de liaison', 18 November 1936. ACO III-5-1, ACO Archives.
57. Berron, L' 'évêque prot. français de Syrie', s.d. [1936, after 18 November]. ACO II-3-5, ACO Archives.
58. Berron to the Delegate of the High Commissioner to the government of Syria, Strasbourg, 6 August 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
59. Couderc to Berron, 30 June, 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
60. Berron to Bianquis, 4 March 1939. ACO II-3-5, ACO Archives.
61. Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 26 January 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
62. Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 30 November 1938. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
63. Couderc to Berron, 30 June 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
64. Couderc to Berron, Damascus, 16 May 1939; Berron to Couderc, Strasbourg, 3 June 1939. ACO III-5-27, ACO Archives.
65. 'Reconstruction' was the word commonly used to evoke relief-cum-state-building efforts in the mandate. This was also true of Armenian refugees: see Migliorino (2008).

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